

'I hope to find myself'. Social work students' initial encounter with practice explored in the context of professional identity.

Abstract: This paper is based on a small scale research study which explores the perceptions and understandings of Master's level students on the same professional career path but from different national backgrounds; England and the United States. In particular, this study identifies and discusses issues raised by students prior to their first experience of practice education, and explores their evolving understanding of what it means to be, or to become, a professional social worker. In order to provide a theoretical framework for our discussion we adapt and use the work of Eliot Freidson, widely regarded as one of the first theorists to consider the evolution of professions and the acquisition of professionalism.

Keywords: social work, practice placements, fieldwork education, professional development, professionalism.

Introduction

The nature and basis of social work practice is controversial and is often open to examination and critique from a range of stakeholders such as service users, practitioners, policists and the general public. Explicit within this debate are questions concerning how social work students are equipped by professional training programmes to face the demands and pressures of practice, as evidenced by comments from serious case reviews into child deaths and government inquiries in the United Kingdom (For example Laming 2003 and Laming 2009).

One of the enduring discussions concerns the fluidity and complexity of professional practice, and the identification of those key components of knowledge, skills and values that social workers need to possess in order to be effective and safe practitioners. For example, the inherent dichotomy between the intuitive use of knowledge and skill acquired in the field, often referred to as 'practice wisdom', versus the call for evidence based practice and the application of a more rational, 'scientific' approach (Grady and Keenan 2014; Samson 2014). Coupled with the increasing requirement for the profession in both the United Kingdom and elsewhere to move towards the acquisition and testing of career long competency and capability, it is perhaps unsurprising that the content and delivery of social work qualifying education continues to be scrutinised, often in a critical manner.

Within this evolving debate it remains contentious as to how social work educators enable students to begin to make the transition from being a 'student' to that of competent professional 'practitioner'. The interconnected and multiple conceptions of what it means to be a 'professional' social worker are controversial and contested, and as Wiles (2013) has indicated, even experienced social workers often find it difficult to define the basis of their professional identity. Whilst the acquisition of skills, knowledge and a sound value base are crucial, the development of 'professionalism' and the transition to 'practitioner' involves a less tangible process of

change. This has been described as a process of internalisation which induces a change in perception, conduct and behaviour, which in turn creates a shift in the persons' sense of identity (Adams and Hean 2006; Shlomo et al 2012; Levy et al 2014).

In order to offer a discussion of this process, this small scale research study explores the perceptions and understandings of Master's level students on the same professional career path but from different national backgrounds; England and the United States. In particular, this study will identify and discuss issues identified by students raised prior to their first experience of practice education, and explore their evolving understanding of what it means to be, or to become, a professional social worker.

In order to provide a theoretical framework for our discussion we adapt and use the work of Eliot Freidson (1923-2005) an American sociologist who is regarded as one of the founders of the sociology of medicine. His wide ranging work on professions and professionalisation within medicine has been reworked on a number of occasions and applied to occupations as diverse as occupational therapy, teaching, business and the training of lawyers and chefs. Freidson (1970) acknowledged that offering a definition of what it meant to be a member of a profession was problematical and open to a range of interpretations dependent on context and the characteristics of the profession. Consequently, he set aside the task of definitional interpretation and chose to analyse the process of what it meant to become a professional, a route he described as 'professionalisation.' Using and adapting Freidson's concept as a theoretical lens, this study will consider the understandings of social work students at the beginning of their process of professionalisation.

Practice education

A widely recognised means of facilitating the transition from student to professional social worker is the requirement common across many programmes globally that students undertake practice education. That is, a formally assessed period of practice in an approved and regulated social work/care setting where the student is supported by a practice educator who has undertaken specialist training to equip them for that role. During the placement the student will be expected to meet various professional and work based competencies and prove that they are capable of working effectively, safely and with a degree of independence in a supported environment. In England a minimum of 200 days of practice on placement is required to be undertaken by students. Typically Masters level students have a 70 day placement in their first year and a 100 day placement in their second year, with an additional thirty days delivered in the university as skills development days. In the United States, Master's social work students are required to undertake a total of 900 hours in placement. For the American school in this study, this breaks down to a 400 hour first year placement and a 500 hour second year placement.

Research has consistently highlighted the importance of this experience in the professional and personal development of social work students (Mathews et al

2014). In particular, placements provide access to a range of essential understandings such as the importance of gaining feedback, the need for reflexivity in practice, the acquisition of core professional skills such as advocacy, multi-disciplinary working, theory informed practice, and the holistic integration of knowledge, skills and values (Bogo 2006, 2010; Bogo & Vayda 1998; Mathews et al 2014). While experience gained during placement is often viewed by students as being one of the most valuable and important elements of earning their degree students can also find placements stressful and challenging (Novell 2014). This exposure to the demands and reality of professional practice, albeit in a supported and regulated environment, is valued highly by both educators and students who view the experience as being a pivotal building block towards the acquisition of a professional identity and a formal qualification (Chui 2009; Mathews et al 2014; Parker 2006). Whilst these tangible learning opportunities are clearly of importance, what is less obvious is how students use their practice experience to assist them to make the transition from the role and identity of 'student' to that of 'practitioner.'

Methodology

A descriptive research design was employed to obtain qualitative feedback from first year Master's level social work students drawn from two courses, both based in predominantly rural areas, one in the mid-west of the United States and one in England. Focus groups were used to explore the understandings, expectations, and reflections of students prior to the commencement of their first practice placement. Ethical approval was sought and received at both institutions, permitting the use of identical questions with participant responses being recorded and transcribed. The focus group data was independently analysed by the respective research teams and then collaboratively examined to identify themes across the cohorts. The English and American teams were both reliant on contextualising and exploring their findings within their local context prior to undertaking a shared analysis.

At this early stage of their professional development students have had some exposure to classroom based teaching but are new to the reality of professional practice. Consequently their understanding of what it means to be a professional social worker and how they may achieve this status is limited. Clearly students have already made a considerable commitment to the profession and have begun to think about the challenges and opportunities presented by going on placement, but their professional identity is not as yet fully formed.

The aims of the study were to;

- Identify the views of students regarding the role of practice placements and how this might influence their understanding of what it means to be a social worker;
- Identify the concerns and anxieties of students regarding their first exposure to practice
- Use the work of Freidson as an explanatory tool to discuss commonalities and differences in expectation across the two cohorts

Findings

A common feeling expressed by both American and English students was that the opportunity to experience professional practice was a watershed moment which they expected would impact on them both as people and as learners. English students in particular referred to their course experience and going on placement as being an incremental process which enabled them to acquire attributes they felt were key to the task of social work and an evolving sense of what it means to be a social worker.

'... when I first started the course I was quite like anxious and a bit... out of my depth. But I think the placement for me, I hope it builds my confidence in not only like my knowledge, but also in my ability to be able to actually do this sort of role.'

Other English students were even more explicit and felt almost fraudulent about assuming the role of practitioner. They expressed this in a number of ways including being *'nervous at the idea of like being let loose on real people,'* whilst another questioned whether she was sufficiently *'worthy'* to be in such a privileged position. Another stated

'I haven't had a massive amount of experience prior, I still kind of feel like I don't know enough to be here. So I think it is just going to be my confidence and feeling like a student social worker... I feel like a bit of an imposter at the minute.'

In a similar way American students too expressed concerns about their lack of experience and their uncertainty about what to expect;

'I don't think I have any experience at all so I'm just walking in blindly and I don't have a way to prepare 'cos I don't know what to expect. ... I'm just going with the flow.'

It is interesting, however, that many participants did have substantial prior experience in social care and all of them possessed a first degree and had been within academic study for several years. Consequently, despite how they felt they did bring with them a substantial body of skills, attributes and learning. Nonetheless, they identified this step on their professional development as being potentially challenging and problematical.

Beyond these fears however, American students identified a range of issues which related either to their own personal identity, or to assumptions as to how they might be perceived by others in a professional context. To an extent they appeared to examine their own personal attributes and identity in a more critical way than English students. For example, students in America who originated from outside of the country expressed concerns regarding how their difference or their position as *'outsiders'* might be negatively perceived by service providers or users of services, or how it might hinder their ability to make a meaningful contribution to placement. In particular, they felt that their limited understanding of the nuances of American culture and their use and comprehension of language might place them at a disadvantage, or cause them to inadvertently offend.

'I think I also have another fear of not having a real grasp of the environment of the American society. Because as a social worker you need to understand the social environment of the people you are working with.'

Similarly 'home grown' students had a perception that their cultural insularity, and their lack of knowledge of difference and diversity, could adversely impact on their ability to work with people who were different to them. Religious belief and practice in particular was seen as being an area of difficulty where students could inadvertently cause offence by either doing or saying something that was inappropriate. It was unclear why this might be the case although researchers such as Gilligan and Furness (2006) have suggested that student social workers in America have not felt equipped to work with faith issues, whilst the State's position in the 'bible belt' might suggest that some students did not feel comfortable with working with religious conservatism.

There was also an acknowledgement that race and ethnicity could be a significant factor. In a predominantly white, rural area of America overseas black students were concerned that negative assumptions about their race and background could impact on their professional identity and credibility.

'..... there's a group of Westerners that still think that Africa has nothing to offer. Are they going to think that this African has something to offer..... that's my big fear.'

At a superficial level then, some students at this early stage of their professional development were sufficiently aware of the impact of their own background and identity to at least express concern regarding their 'cultural competence' and their ability to work with people who were different to them. In the English focus groups, however, which did contain non-white students originally from outside of the United Kingdom, issues of race, ethnicity and difference were not explicitly mentioned although it is perhaps significant that these students had lived and worked in the country for a number of years and were more familiar with the language and culture. This might also reflect a measure of naivety, or a lack of consciousness, as numerous studies in an English context have consistently found that black social workers experience significant tensions and pressures practising in a racist society. (Chand 2008; Mbarushimana and Robbins 2015; Webb et al 2002)

Students in England, however, did express a concern about 'fitting in' with the culture of organisations particularly as they perceived themselves as being older than the average student and could be working in teams of younger people. Given the age profile of social care workers in England, and the relative youthfulness of the students, this is perhaps surprising but is possibly a recognition that the private, voluntary, and independent sector has a more 'youthful' demographic than the statutory sector.

Moving beyond the influence of personal attributes and how they might influence the placement experience, both sets of students also expressed apprehension about the potential disconnect between what is taught and assimilated in the classroom and the reality of day to day practice. Both pre placement focus groups expressed this in similar ways with students highlighting their incomplete understanding of key

components of practice such as law, values, knowledge and theory. This led them to fear that they might be 'caught out' by practice educators who had expectations of them which they did not feel able to meet, or that they would present as anxious and unprepared;

'I think it's the fear of being put in a position where you don't know what you're doing.... and just getting stuck in a bit of a panic mode'.

These fears, however, were exacerbated by a concern that students were dependent on others to make their placement a positive and meaningful experience. This apprehension was expressed in different ways. Some were concerned that they were about to be 'thrown in at the deep end', but also seemed to have confidence that practice educators were experienced in their role and were able to appropriately pace a placement. Conversely, students also expressed the desire that they would not be meaningfully employed and had a fear of being bored or sat around 'twiddling their thumbs.'

Connected with this fear was also the hope that students would encounter new and challenging experiences which would 'bring alive' their classroom based learning and stretch them as people and practitioners. Both sets of students talked about their desire to increase their personal and professional confidence, to apply social work methods and techniques, and to assimilate the norms and values of the profession.

Students recognised the pivotal role of those educators who had prime responsibility for their learning but were sufficiently aware that they could and would learn from a range of other people they encountered on their placements. English students in particular were able to reflect on their past or current experience of working in social care and hoped that they would be entering a collegial environment where knowledge would be openly shared;

'I just love the office chats that we used to have about something, somebody with a case and there'd just be like a whole group sort of thinking about it, different perspectives on it, it's just so interesting'.

Beyond this informal sharing of knowledge, the English focus group highlighted other ways in which they expected to learn. In particular they suggested that asking questions of the placement personnel, even to the extent of being perceived as being a nuisance, would be helpful. There was, however, a clear purpose to this inquisitiveness;

'I'd have to know the reason why, or why that's there, or what made that happen, not just be told that happened. I need to know the background to it if you know what I mean.'

Other students echoed this desire to acquire an in-depth understanding of why and how practice decisions were made and felt that direct exposure to the thinking of experienced practitioners was of importance.

Students also spoke about the usefulness of on line training courses, induction, research and reading as ways in which they would learn. Above all, students felt that they would learn from being immersed in the task. American students talked about

the desire to be 'full participants' on placement and to be seen as 'working a full shift.' Similarly, the English focus group acknowledged that many of them learnt by doing, even if this was an uncomfortable process that did not always correspond with their preferred style of learning;

'Yeah, I would like to say that I can, just sit and learn that way. But I know that I don't, I know that sometimes I need to be chucked in the deep end to do it'.

The very real possibility that they would learn from service users was also present within the focus groups, as was the possibility that students would be able to learn from mistakes – both their own and the mistakes of others.

Discussion

Central to Freidson's (1970;1986) argument is an understanding that professions are social constructions, strongly influenced by the emergence and demands of capitalism in Britain and the United States which emphasised the need for expert knowledge and expertise. In particular, he argued that the process of professionalisation, which those seeking admission to a profession needed to undergo, was characterised by three interconnected facets. Firstly, the ability of the prospective professional to acquire responsibility for meeting the demands and requirements of the market served by the profession. Secondly, that professions acquired status and power by organising and delivering their own distinct training, often based within Universities, which inculcated a range of values, ways of working and knowledge discrete to the profession. Thirdly, that this basic training needed to be augmented by the provision of further specialist training which emphasises the complexity of the profession and increases its' prominence in the eyes of society. Professional social work education in England and the United States corresponds closely to this theoretical model. In both countries social work is a highly regulated profession which clearly articulates the training and qualifications required by social workers, and increasingly delineates the responsibilities of those who work in the sector. The curriculum in England is prescribed, admission to the profession is regulated, and the title of social worker is protected. In the United States there is more flexibility between states but there is common understanding as to the qualifications, training and function of social workers. On qualification, social workers are required to undertake further specialist training in order to equip them for the complexity of their role. Additionally, in England there is an increasing focus on social workers acquiring specialist registration beyond qualification in order to further bolster their claim to expertise.

In Freidson's theoretical conception of professionalisation, the initial practice placement represents the first test a prospective social worker must negotiate in order to be seen to have met and acquired responsibility for meeting the demands and requirements of the market served by the profession. As has been noted, within the focus groups some students expressed feelings of uncertainty as to how they would manage this transitional phase and acquire the expertise they felt they needed

to achieve credibility as practitioners. Students from both cohorts expressed similar views regarding their concerns and used phrases such as 'walking in blindly' and feeling 'like an imposter' to reflect these feelings of insecurity. One American respondent expressed the aspiration to 'learn my place..... I hope to find myself basically.' Whilst it would be unwise to over extrapolate from these phrases, they suggest that students recognised that they would need to develop or redefine their ontological position as their status changed from 'student' to beginning 'social worker.' This sense of exploration and movement is similarly identified by Wiles (2013) in her research where she talks about social work students not only needing to acquire knowledge and skills, but also developing an appropriate professional identity. Issues of identity and professionalism are often difficult to define, but it is interesting that students talked about their first experience of being in practice in terms of what they might gain – confidence, knowledge, skills, the ability to apply methods and theories, to name but a few. There was no sense that a transition however welcome and anticipated involves both gain and loss. As Seymour (2006:463) suggests in her own narrative account of transiting from practice to academia, a move which promised so many gains actually left her feeling deskilled and devalued. Students did, however, recognise that placements could be potentially disruptive and unsettling. English students in particular felt that the demands of coping with family life, financial pressures and achieving some sort of life/work balance would be difficult. American students highlighted the financial uncertainty that some of them faced, whilst others felt fortunate to have supportive partners who were willing to work whilst they completed their studies. Again this was indicative of the fact that many of them were mature students who had already acquired considerable personal commitments which would need to be managed during their placement.

Nonetheless, it is interesting that all participants implicitly and explicitly stated despite their anxieties that their forthcoming period of practice education was of considerable value. English students in particular spoke of how excited they were, and how they anticipated that being on placement would be the most enjoyable part of their course. Whilst this might seem an obvious point to make about students who have committed themselves to a course of professional education, it highlights how much they value the 'applying', the 'doing', and the 'practising' and see it as a way of transforming and moulding theoretical and hypothetical knowledge gained in the classroom into something of greater value. Whilst this point should not be over emphasised, it is noteworthy that students felt that they were now entering a particularly meaningful period of their professional studies, perhaps of greater value than their academic studies.

These feelings further correspond with Freidson's theory of professionalisation which suggests that there is a demarcation or differentiation within professions which often pits the academic against the practitioner with the latter viewing training offered by universities as being 'too academic, theoretical, or unrealistic; (and) fails to prepare novices for practice.' (1986:212) As previously stated, this dynamic is particularly relevant within an English context where criticism of professional social work training by employers and government is not uncommon. Consequently, it is possible to

argue that students either consciously or unconsciously internalised these messages and therefore preferenced the learning they were about to receive on placement.

Secondly, Freidson (1986:107) argues that as part of a profession's claim to credibility, admission to the profession requires the prospective professional to access a specific 'knowledge monopoly'. That is a defined, specialist body of knowledge only known and knowable to members of that profession, which gives the professional a range of insights and privileges not accessible to those outside. It is interesting that students often highlighted how they hoped and intended to gain a deeper understanding of the knowledge that underpins professional social work whilst on placement. In particular they seemed to want to acquire those areas of knowledge or skill which were especially momentous. As one student from England put it (I want to learn) 'something you could take with you for the rest of your life.' American students talked about their desire to work with crisis situations or 'out of control' people and recognised how 'specialist' their placements were and how therefore they needed to acquire knowledge above and beyond what the University had taught them.

As previously noted, social workers in both England and the United States are required by their professional and regulatory bodies to be able to demonstrate competency across a range of knowledge, skills and values; in effect they must access the 'knowledge monopoly' of the social work profession. Central to Freidson's theory is an argument that this process is essentially about the acquisition of professional power through the acquirement of this prescribed and regulated expertise. Whilst students were able to talk about their desire to acquire expertise whilst on placement, and aspired to achieve a growth in their confidence and ability, they did not explicitly talk about the dynamic of power. On the contrary often their aspiration was to have a shared, egalitarian experience of learning which recognised the expertise of practice educators, team members and service users but was established on a collegial basis. Implicit within this desire was a recognition that they were being assessed whilst on placement and that in many ways, others held positions of power. This latter observation is of relevance as Freidson argues that all professions employ 'gatekeepers' in order to safeguard the privileges and reputation of the profession. In practice learning it is clear that practice educators have this role as they have the power to decide if a student passes or fails their assessment on placement and therefore enters or does not enter the social work profession. Other stakeholders, such as university staff, team managers and service users, also have a role to play in this gatekeeping function but are not as prominent as practice educators. Consequently, at this early stage of their professional development students were well aware that they were encountering a potential barrier to accessing their chosen profession.

Finally, Freidson argued that in order for the complexity and prominence of the profession to be recognised by society that basic training needed to be augmented by the provision of further specialist training. As previously noted, students viewed their access to practice as being especially relevant as it represented a gateway to a world characterised by specialisation. For example, they cited the necessity of having to access in house training courses which further confirmed the complexity of

their agency's work, the breadth and depth of specialist knowledge possessed by their practice educators, and the anticipated uncertainty and fluidity of the practice they expected to encounter. Despite these feelings, however, practice learning is only an integral component of initial social work education and as such does not fit Freidson's typology. Interestingly, the increasing requirement for practice educators in England to receive additional training, qualification and accreditation does fit Freidson's typology. As such, it is telling that those tasked with gatekeeping the profession appear to require ever greater specialisation in order to fulfil their function.

Conclusion

This small scale case study of students on two Master's level social work courses has presented a picture of students at the beginning of their journey towards acquiring the status of a professional. Using the work of Freidson as a theoretical lens it has offered an analysis of the process of professionalisation in one profession which could be further developed and explored in other health and social care occupational groups. It has highlighted the concerns of students as they face the prospect of practice, as well as their uncertainty about themselves and their status. Whilst many could relate to feelings of 'walking in blindly' to placement it is appropriate to report that the overwhelming majority made a successful start to their passage towards becoming a professional.

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